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ABSTRACT

Those outside the circle of scientists and research and academic administrators who criticize certain features of the symbiotic relationship between campus research and the Federal Government run the risk of being labeled anti-science by persons who view a continuing, increasing, and unquestioned flow of federal funds as the sine qua non of campus research. But the issue becomes clouded by the strain of declining enrollments and general problems of finance for higher education. The Senate Appropriations Committee has been concerned with these problems, and with the cooperation of the National Science Foundation has raised some questions about possible inequities in college research faculty salaries as compared with those of other research scientists. (Author/MSE)

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GOVERNMENT FUNDING: LEGISLATIVE CONCERNS WITH INFLATION OF ACADEMIC INCOME

by

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Remarks of

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U.S. Senator Henry Bellmon

at the

Third Annual Academic Planning Conference

University of Southern California

Los Angeles, California

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My presence here today is intended, I am sure, to provide a point of view from outside the academic/scientific community and its bureaucracy. These remarks ought to be considered to be my own distillation of a growing concern both on and off Capitol Hill regarding present arrangements for academic research grants. They are a reflection of discussions held with various persons interested in the process, and particularly of a continuing dialogue between the Senate Independent Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee and the National Science Foundation. The organizers of the Academic Planning Conference must be applauded for presenting this critical look at institutional arrangements for the compensation of faculty which have evolved over the years, apparently without benefit of a great deal of careful thought and planning.

Those outside the circle of scientists and research and academic administrators who criticize certain features of the symbiotic relationship between campus research and the Federal government run the risk of being labeled "anti Science" by persons who view a continuing, increasing and unquestioned flow of Federal funds as the sine qua non of campus research. But surely, the issue becomes clouded by the strain of declining enrollments and general problems of finance for higher education. Those who are raising difficult and uncomfortable questions about research funding have supported increasing levels of funding over the past few years for the National Science Foundation, and the over-all level of Federal support for research has not declined in recent times, though it is beginning to level off. I think it is fair to say that most legislators are quite aware of the importance and significance to the society and economy of both basic and applied research, and that what they are

questioning is not so much the role of science and research as it is the institutional arrangements which have become associated with science and research.

It may be true that there is a real need for more money for science and research, and it may be that higher education in general needs greater Federal support under coherent and sustained Federal policies and programs, and it is certainly true that major shifts in research emphasis at the Federal level can cause agonizing dislocations on campus. But these are separate problems which must be debated and dealt with separately if we are to preserve and enhance the principle of Federal support for meritorious research so as to ultimately ensure technical progress in fields which can be related to National needs. Once decisions to fund research begin to turn on the need to maintain universities or enhance the prosperity of scientists, then questions of merit and quality are certain to be secondary.

Over the years, some researchers and research administrators have liberally interpreted research grants as gifts, to be used in as flexible a manner as necessary. During the expansionary days of the 1960s, basic research supporting agencies such as the National Science Foundation, the Office of Naval Research, and the Atomic Energy Commission - to name a few - were perhaps too passive administratively, reinforcing the perception that Federal monies are some sort of entitlement. What may have amounted to a laissez faire posture by Government can be blamed for part of our present difficulty.

Today, there is growing concern about such practices as pooling of research funds, since that can have the effect of undermining the principle

of merit, to say nothing of the peer review process. Increasingly, it appears that what is called for is more explicit negotiating on the part of Federal research contract officers and the enforcement of agreements with research institutions. Society deserves to get what it pays for, and government is the means we have for ensuring that fair value is received for the subsidy granted. I must stress that I am not implying that researchers and research administrators are diverting funds to wholly extraneous purposes; rather, there is growing concern that research funds are not being used in the way that Congress and the Executive Branch think they are. The Congress - and more specifically, the Senate Appropriations Committee - does not intend to appropriate funds for purposes other than those originally intended in the legislation enacted.

The nature of the bargain reached - the research contract or grant - thus becomes central. An important part of that bargain is the determination of the appropriate rate of faculty salary reimbursement and the faculty commitment which it represents.

More than two years ago, the Senate Independent Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee, concerned that the rate of reimbursement under NSF grants for Senior Scientists might be excessive, asked the Foundation to review its salary policies and report to the Subcommittee. The Foundation responded with a report outlining the importance of this salary support to the vitality of the university research effort. The report concluded that: (1) academic salaries have not kept pace with those of college graduates in general in this decade; (2) the salaries of academic scientists are not "excessively high" and do not equal the salaries of the best paid professionals in other industries which have received substantial Government

R&D support; (3) the effect of NSF salary support to faculty has only shifted emphasis toward research from teaching and has not increased academic year earnings; and (4) "a high dollar limit on summer salary would be an ineffective gesture while a low dollar limit would most likely divert effort from research to other activities without a significant effect on faculty compensation."

In addition to being unresponsive to the questions raised by the Subcommittee, the report embodied a tone of defensive and uncritical advocacy which did not reflect the Foundation's consideration of this matter from the standpoint of providing effective and accountable administration of public funds, and which therefore has raised doubts about the Foundation's capacity to produce impartial and balanced assessments of the scientific endeavor.

Last year's Committee report again directed NSF to re-examine its salary policies to determine what new guidelines may be needed to offer reasonable assurance (1) that the faculty time being supported is actually being devoted to the grant-supported activities and not to other income-producing efforts and (2) that the Government is not creating inequities between the earned income of academic scientists and its own senior scientists. The Committee now expects to receive the report just prior to this year's Appropriations Committee hearings.

A number of points have been raised by members of the Subcommittee concerning faculty salaries, and it may be well to summarize these briefly:

(1) In Canada and Great Britain, according to a Congressional Research Service study, faculty salaries are not paid as a

part of research grants. If these countries are able to pursue aggressive research programs without paying faculty salaries, what is the rationale for the U.S. doing so? The point here is that it ought not to be automatically assumed that faculty salary subsidy is appropriate as a part of research grants and contracts.

(2) From the vantage point of the recipient, a research grant may be a significant source of non-monetary compensation. NSF and other Federal research grants have been known to figure prominently in tenure and promotion decisions on campuses. Individual faculty members, entire academic departments, and graduate students benefit from the opportunities created by research grants and contracts.

(3) The means for ensuring that principal investigators carry out their contract commitments do not presently appear to be adequate. There is concern that a prominent name may be used to get a grant, but that the principal investigator may spend very little time on the project, preferring instead to provide minimal supervision to other faculty or to graduate students. In such cases, salary reimbursement for the principal investigator may constitute Federal subsidy of other income-producing activity.

(4) The means for ensuring that a given stellar principal investigator is not simultaneously committed to a number of research projects, thus spreading himself too thin to be effective,

could be improved.

(5) Disclosure of private consulting by a grantee and its relationship to the research to be performed under a grant award has been of concern to the Appropriations Subcommittee, not only because of possible conflicts of interest but also because of its bearing upon the general salary issue and its possible influence upon the research activities performed by scientists.

(6) Finally, there is the more general concern that research grants and contracts are not the proper vehicles to meet the general financial (and salary) problems of universities, and that current insistence on greater grant and contract research support for these purposes can turn universities away from their proper academic focus, and may further undermine the present shaky basis for Federal support of academic salaries.

These are some of the considerations which have made faculty salaries an issue with the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee. It is never comfortable to re-examine old practices, even when the purpose is to achieve the greatest return to the Nation. This conference, I am sure, was not designed to justify the status quo, and therefore we can expect that its examination of the ethical and economic issues surrounding academic salaries and supplemental income will guide us toward better institutional arrangements.

Congress intends to continue the support of basic and applied research on campus and elsewhere. These good intentions, in order to be effective at the operational level, must not be abused and may be considerably enhanced by an active and conscientious academic community.